The Fayette County African American settlements

Fayette County, indiana

The 19th century African American population of Fayette County was small but increased steadily through the decades. In 1820 there were a total of nine persons of color. In 1830 the count rose to thirty-one increasing to 53 in 1840, seventy-two in 1850; 87 in 1860 and 92 in 1870. The majority of persons resided in Connersville Township. Of that township population cohort, the majority lived in the town of Connersville rather than living in a rural environment.

Three of Fayette County's nine townships (Columbia, Fairview and Waterloo) reported no African American population in any of the decennial censuses 1850 through 1870. The population of the remaining five townships might be described as intermittent.

Figures are as follows:

Harrison, 1850 – 14, 1860 – 0, 1870 – 1;

Jackson, 1850 – 0, 1860 – 7, 1870 -0;

Jennings, 1850 – 2, 1860 – 0, 1870 -1;

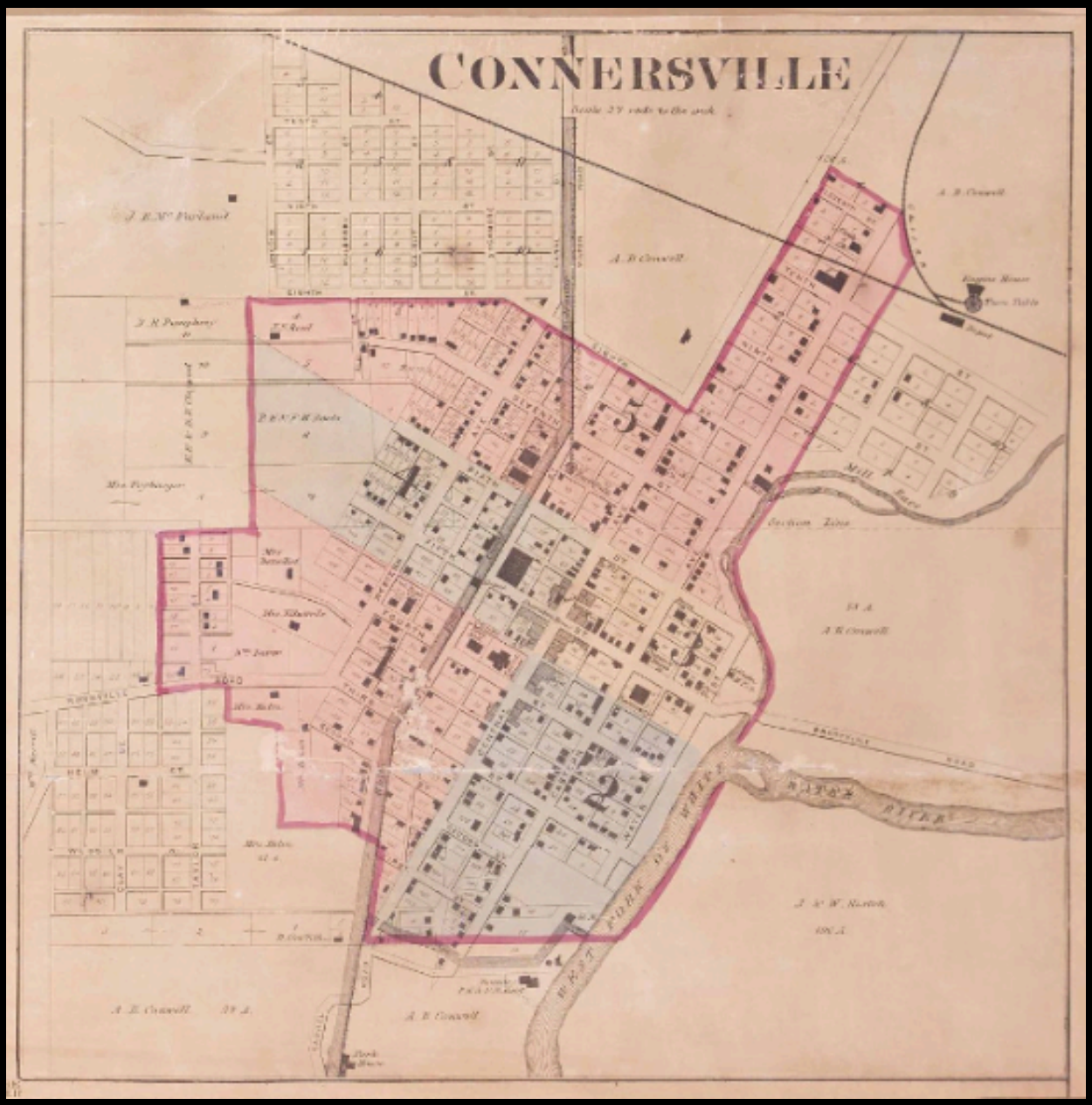
Orange 1850 – 0, 1860 – 17, 1870 – 1;

and Posey, 1850 – 12, 1860 – 1; 1870 – 3.

William Trail was a notable early presence in the area that became Fayette County. In 1814, Trail ran away from slavery in South Carolina and arrived in the Whitewater River Valley area before Indiana statehood. Trail fought off slave catchers both physically and in the courts and arranged to purchase his freedom. He married a free woman of color, Sarah Wadkins, who had migrated from Virginia to the Beech settlement in Rush County. They lived on a 25-acre farm located east of Connersville for a few years before relocating with their growing family to Henry County where they had purchased 160 acres of land.

Another notable African American farmer in Fayette County was James/John Van Horn. Van Horn escaped slavery in Kentucky (c. 1826) and took refuge in Rush County eventually relocating to Fayette County. Working as a teamster he was able to save enough money to purchase his freedom. In 1840 he entered 160 acres of land in Blackford County. Van Horn married Nancy Foster of Ohio in 1842. After experiencing racial hostility in Blackford County he traded the tract for eighty acres in Fayette County and returned to the area in 1854. In time he added to his holdings accumulating 121 acres on Alquina Road east of Connersville. He constructed a substantial farmstead

that stands today (637 E Alquina Road). The Van Horns are buried in the nearby cemetery that surrounds the Village Creek Church (CR 150 S). [This church is identified in the Fayette County Interim Report.]



Historic Connersville - Indiana Historical Print Collection - Collections Hosted by the Indiana State Library

The black population of Connersville and environs was large enough to support multiple church congregations. Black Methodists began meeting c. 1844-1845 eventually erecting a small frame church that was in use until 1872. Subsequently a brick building was purchased (described as "property of the regular Methodists") from the Christian congregation in Connersville (Barrows, p448). An AME church was also organized with worship at a structure on Water Street. Rev. Daniel Winslow was among its first ministers. Wesley Chapel is mentioned as well in connection with the "colored Methodists" of Connersville (Barrows, p 405). Black Baptists organized Mt. Zion Baptist (colored) in 1888 meeting in the city hall before constructing a building in 1891. A roster of the charter members of Connersville Christian Church, a white congregation, includes Elijah West, "a colored servant of the Holtons."

Connersville had two barbers, both African American: Henry Holland, born in Ohio; and Andrew Turner, born in Indiana. Many of Fayette County's African Americans had their origins in either Indiana or Kentucky. Others came from Ohio, the Carolinas and Virginia. Additional surnames included Foster, Scott, Hickelson, and Munford.

Although outside the time frame of this project, an important migration occurred between the 1880's and the 1900's. Over a period many African American families left Boone County, Kentucky, and settled in Connersville. Manufacturing and other industries offered the prospect of steady employment. Schools in Connersville offered educational opportunities that were superior to segregated schools in Kentucky.

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By Georgia Cravey, October 21, 2014